

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, on behalf of myself and all Oregon pear growers, I want to thank the House Committee on Agriculture for inviting me to testify today.

My name is Ron Rivers. My family lives and farms in the beautiful region of Hood River, Oregon. We are third generation farmers with the fourth generation ready to take over. We farm pears on just under 200 acres. Our family pear production exceeds six million pounds per year. All major pear varieties are produced by our farm.

I am here today to provide comments about the Farm Bill from a growers perspective. The 2002 Farm Bill began to recognize the importance of specialty crops and their economic importance within the agricultural sector. The majority of growers in Hood River, and in Oregon, are specialty crop producers. For example, Oregon's number one agricultural crop is nursery stock. Pears are not far behind at number nine in value. For years, specialty crop producers such as myself, have largely been unable to access funds and services provided by the Farm Bill until 2002. As you know, as a specialty crop grower, I do not receive subsidies. I do not receive direct loan payments. I was pleased to see recognition of the importance of specialty crops in the 2002 Farm Bill. I would like to see that recognition increased and more programs tailored to our industries.

For example, under the Conservation Security Program(CSP), Middle Columbia-Hood watershed has more approved applications than any other watershed in Oregon. The Middle Columbia-Hood watershed has 246 approved CSP applications. Oregon overall has 718, representing a dollar amount of \$19,766,897 to local producers. These are local producers who have been and are continuing to use farming practices that enhance wildlife habitat, conserve water, protect water, lower farm chemical inputs, monitor soil health, use non-petroleum fuels, and generally conserve and enhance our natural resources. The entire public benefits from these practices. Until the availability of the CSP program, these practices were funded entirely by the grower yet benefited everyone who has an interest in clean air and clean water. CSP is a valuable program, extensively used, and should be continued and expanded.

A second program providing direct help for the improvement of our land and water is the Environmental Quality Incentives Program(EQUIP). EQUIP, like CSP, allows local producers access to programs to help meet the intent of state and federal legislation, such as the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts. This program benefits everyone who lives in our state and nation.

As one of the many roles that I have within the pear industry, I am elected by my peers as the Oregon grower representative on the board of directors of the NW Pear Bureau. The NW Pear Bureau is the marketing and promotion arm, operating under a federal marketing order, for our pears. I cannot overstate the importance of the Market Access Program(MAP) to our industry. The MAP program allows us to continually open new markets for Oregon and Washington fresh pears. Approximately 35 per cent of all pears are exported. The 2002 Farm Bill increased MAP funds from 90 million to 200 million dollars. These funds are essential to our industry and I urge you to continue with them.

MAP funds, although viewed by some as “corporate welfare”, directly benefit me, the grower. Without the assistance to open foreign markets, the domestic market would need to absorb the pears that are currently exported. As you know, as a producer of a raw agricultural product, I must compete globally with other producers. These producers have far less regulations and much lower labor costs. MAP funds help “level the playing field” in the global marketplace.

Section 10603 of the 2002 Farm Bill is a very good start in providing more fruits and vegetables, and other specialty crops, for use in schools and food service programs. Given the documented problems with obesity and childhood diabetes, this 200 million dollars is a very good start. Not only does this program benefit our children who are participating in school lunch programs, it provides additional outlets for fresh fruit and vegetable producers. This program should be greatly expanded. The same can be said for Section 4301 which deals with commodities for the school lunch program. Our pear industry participates in commodity purchases for the school lunch program.

Another program in the Farm Bill is Food Stamps. I would like to see what I call “Green Stamps” as part of this nutrition program. The concept is simple. “Green Stamps” would be food coupons that are required to be used on fresh or processed fruits and vegetables. A percentage of a client’s food stamps would be in these “Green Stamps”. Such a program would go a long way, once again, in fighting obesity and diseases related to it. It would also go a long way in meeting the recommended “5-a-day” servings of fruits and vegetables. A “Green Stamp” program would also benefit growers by increasing a market outlet for our produce.

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee. I do need to take just a few more moments to comment on immigration policy. Although immigration policy is not part of the Farm Bill, I am a grower of a perishable commodity. If I do not have the labor to harvest my pears, no number of Farm Bill programs or dollars from the USDA can keep me in business. Wages are not the issue. Available and willing labor is the issue. H2A programs, without a huge overhaul, is not the answer. As a third generation family farmer, my son, Aaron, the fourth generation, will not be farming unless agriculture is granted a guest worker program. Without a guest worker program, Rivers Orchards, Inc will be history and the 2007 Farm Bill won’t matter.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.